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The Anthropological Significance of Knockloon Hill

A Thesis Submitted
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Designation
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This Study by: Emma Rosentrater

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Date

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Some of the most intriguing mysteries in archaeology surround monuments that are all that remains of cultures that have left almost no record of their existence. Their beliefs have been lost to the ages and the purpose of the monuments they built along with them. Yet with proper analysis, it may be possible to learn about a site's purpose and significance in the society in which it was built. One site in particular is Knockloon Hill in County Clare, Ireland (*fig. 1 & 2*). Though it may not be as grand or impressive as other sites, it may hold the key to filling in important gaps in current knowledge. The site has only recently been excavated and the full importance of the site itself and that of the artifacts found there has yet to be fully realized. An analysis may be able to answer questions about the ritual significance of the site and its place in the historical record.

Historical Background

The Chalcolithic – the Copper Age – is a period of time technically encompassed within the Bronze Age. The typical progression from the Stone Age to the Bronze Age includes a period of time where people had begun to create metal tools but had not yet discovered the technology for creating metal alloys. Typically, copper is the metal of choice in this period, as it directly leads to the use of bronze, bronze being an alloy of copper and tin. Throughout most of the world, the Copper Age is so short as to be a useless distinction from the rest of the Bronze Age, as copper is generally too soft to make decent tools or weapons. Ireland is unique in this regard, as Ireland has an extended Chalcolithic. This is due to the fact that most of Irish copper at the time came from one particular site – Ross Island – and the copper at this site comes out of the ground with a uniquely high concentration of arsenic (O'Brien 1995). This meant that the copper from that site was especially hard, which, in turn, meant that at the beginning of the Bronze Age,

the Irish had access to copper that was able to be utilized for weapons and tools on its own, without the need to create an alloy.

In Ireland, the Chalcolithic is generally accepted to have begun around 2500 BC and extended to between 2200-2000 BC, with the Bronze Age beginning directly after (Jones *et al.* 2015). The Copper Age and the following Bronze Age was a time of massive change across all of Europe, not just Ireland. The dawn of the Copper Age marked the development of metalworking technology in Europe for the first time, and copper metalwork was followed by work in gold and then bronze (Waddell & Shee Twohig 1995). For this reason, this period also marked a time of major developments in trade relations. Although copper was easily accessible for the Irish, the tin needed to create bronze was not. This necessitated the establishment of trade with peoples outside of Ireland in order to obtain the tin needed to create bronze. The Bronze Age saw trade networks connecting Ireland, Britain, and continental Europe in new and complex ways. Ireland was able to play a rather significant role in these trade relations due to its natural deposits of copper and gold (Waddell & Shee Twohig 1995). The establishment of these far-reaching networks of trade brought about a period of rapid and extensive change, in most areas of life. New metalworking technology produced an explosion of new artifacts, from new weapons like the halberd to items of great political and religious significance like the lunulae.

Although no written records of this time remain, it is clear that this was also a time of social and religious change. The artifacts that were developed during this period came into being in a complex network of social relations and many examples are found from Scandinavia to Spain, all from around the same time (Butler 1963, Waddell & Shee Twohig 1995). Evidence indicates that farming became more intensive during this period, and a gradual change began to take place in how the dead were buried (Jones *et al.* 2015, Harrison 1980) Previously in Ireland,

there had existed a series of similar but distinct burial practices, usually involving burying people in communal megalithic tombs, of which there were several varieties that followed a general linear progression, beginning with the portal tombs. With the advent of the Chalcolithic, however, burial practices became more varied. Some continued to utilize the stone megaliths in the form of the wedge tomb, while others turned to earthen barrows (Jones *et al.* 2015). Both of these retained the previous practice of communal burials, but other practices, such as burials in cists marked the beginning of single-person burials in Ireland (Carlin 2018).

During this period, a movement of material culture was moving across continental Europe and into Ireland, and may have been responsible for some of these changes in artifacts and burial practices (Carlin 2011). This movement is known as the Beaker phenomenon, and is marked by a series of artifacts that usually are found in a burial context. These artifacts include the unique pots from which the phenomenon derives its name, barbed and tanged arrowheads, metal ax heads, archer's wrist bracers, and tanged daggers (Carlin 2018, Harrison 1980). It is also accompanied by apparent changes in at least parts of the culture, as Beaker type burials are usually burials of single males in a crouched inhumation accompanied by these grave goods, a departure from previous types of burials, which included multiple people: men, women, and children. The prevalence of weapons in these caches of grave goods has led archaeologists to speculate that the movement of goods was accompanied by new cultural features that placed special emphasis on the role of warrior in society, and that these single burials were a way to honor men who had made particular achievements in related activities (Calin 2011).

Ireland has a unique relationship with this material culture. Beaker package artifacts have been found in Ireland, but not in the same ways they are found throughout the rest of Europe. Whereas elsewhere, Beaker artifacts are most frequently found in burial contexts, this is not the

case for Ireland. Beaker pots do show up occasionally in burials in Ireland; however, seventy-nine percent of all Beaker pottery in Ireland comes from settlements (Carlin 2018). Other artifacts, such as the archer's wrist-bracers are not found in burials at all in Ireland. Burials of single men do appear in the archaeological record in Ireland around this time, but usually without the traditional Beaker package (Harrison 1980).

The Site

Knockloon Hill sits just outside of Killinaboy, County Clare, Ireland. The hill itself is not especially high, but it is particularly steep and sits on the edge of the Burren, which is a unique geologic feature of karstic limestone formations that is characterized by stretches of grey stone ground and high-drainage soil that does not grow crops particularly well. However, Knockloon itself is a drumlin, made up of much more fertile glacially deposited soil (Dowling, 2017). The Burren, in particular the area nearby Knockloon Hill, has a particularly high number of prehistoric sites. Poul nabrone – the oldest definitively dated tomb in Ireland (Lynch 1988) – is approximately five miles away, and sites from the Bronze Age to the late medieval period pepper the nearby landscape.

Most notable, the hill next to Knockloon is Roughaun Hill, which has the highest concentrations of wedge tombs in all of Ireland (Jones *et al.* 2015). It also is the site of a so-called “Beaker settlement.” This site contains ancient field walls and a settlement that has been dated to the Chalcolithic. The presence of a large amount of Beaker pottery has led researchers to conclude that the people who lived in this settlement were fully participating in Beaker culture, whatever form that may have taken (Jones & Walsh 1996).

Additionally, Knockloon Hill is situated in what was once the deer park for the nearby Leamaneh Castle, a fifteen-century tower house that was expanded to be a manner house in the seventeenth century (Jones 2004). Although not strictly relevant to the site at the time of its construction, the residents of this castle may have known of the barrow's presence and visited it on occasion.

This is a landscape filled with history and significance. And Knockloon Hill is no exception. At the top of the hill, visible for many miles, is a series of archaeological features, although only one is still visible without geophysical technology. This is the main monument on the site, a modest but distinctive ring barrow, which has been preliminarily dated to the Chalcolithic, roughly 2500 – 2000 BC.

Barrows are found all across Ireland and are circular mounds of dirt typically rounded and surrounded by an embankment and ditch in sequence. They are a type of burial monument, and may contain inhumations in the center of the mound, cremated remains in the mound or the ditch, or a combination thereof. They are distinguishable from other monuments due to their unique structure of having the bank on the outside of the ditch, the opposite of a defensive structure meant to keep attackers out (*fig.3*). It is often theorized that this was an intentional choice by the builders as a method to keep the spirits of the dead inside (Personal communication, Ó Maoldúin 2018). In spite of their frequency in the Irish landscape, they are not typically studied in depth. Even the nomenclature of classifying the different types that exist in Ireland is still being debated (Newman, 1997) and has been so for a while, with no indication of either resolution or widespread interest. Literature covering the significance of similar barrows found in England is much more common (Field, 1998).

The Excavation

The barrow at Knockloon Hill was excavated by the Irish Field School of Prehistoric Archaeology under the direction of Dr. Ros Ó Maoldúin in the summer of 2018. During the summer, one trench was put through the barrow itself, from the edge of the ditch to the center of the mound with a larger square over the mound itself. A second trench was put through the first of two features further up the hill. These features were initially thought to be enclosures of some kind, perhaps a palisade for containing animals or even a wood henge. However, the excavation was rather inconclusive on the matter; it may have been a ring ditch or another barrow. It was not possible to determine from the evidence found in that particular trench. The trench through the barrow, however, found a plethora of artifacts of interest. Numerous artifacts were found in the barrow itself, including the bank and the ditch. The trench through the second feature, however, turned up very little besides features indicating it was a man-made construction and a possible post hole. More investigation is needed of this feature to determine what it is.

The excavation was meant as a general investigation into the monument to see what could be found. It was hypothesized that, due to the monument's unique location in the landscape that artifacts would be found from many different time periods. As it was the first barrow excavated in County Clare, it also offered a good opportunity to gain more specialized knowledge about the region. It was also intended to expand the geophysical survey of the area and gain more information about features discovered in the survey of the area the previous summer (Ó Maoldúin 2018).

These artifacts were examined during the investigation, and firsthand experience of the site was gained by participation in the excavation. There are serious gaps in the literature around important aspects of the site of Knockloon Hill, including gaps that analysis of this site may be

able to fill in. To address this lack of knowledge, this project proposes to provide an investigation into the site at Knockloon Hill by conducting a review of the existing literature that covers similar sites and artifacts in other locations and use these to interpret Knockloon.

The Artifacts

Among the numerous artifacts discovered in the main trench through the barrow were a large amount of cremated human bone, uncremated animal bone, beads, a Chalcolithic arrowhead, and an archer's wrist bracer. The cremated human bone was from numerous depositions, and certain areas in the barrow showed a large amount of charcoal from such depositions. This would indicate that the barrow itself was used for an extended period of time, with numerous individuals being interred there.

The animal bones are much less clear in how and why they ended up in the barrow. Some may have been intentionally placed in the monument as grave goods, but it is more likely that they were part of ritual feasts that took place on the mound to honor or celebrate the dead. An almost complete cow skeleton was discovered in the ditch, which would seem to generally lend support to this theory. Such feasts would have established the barrow as a ritual site, a place of connection with the land of the dead, and not just a place to visit only when in the process of burying someone.

The beads might indicate similar things. The beads discovered are not all from the same period. Beads such as the large blue and white herringbone bead are medieval in origin, though they may have been deposited at a later date. For these beads, it is almost certain that they fell off the clothing of someone merely visiting the barrow. Due to the age and the location of the

barrow in the deer park of Leamaneh, it is possible that these beads belonged to residents of the castle visiting the site, perhaps carrying on the tradition of feasting on the mound long after the purpose of such an act had been forgotten. As for the smaller beads, dating is more difficult, but they may be significantly older. The presence of more than ten beads of the same size, shape, and color, two of which were found still joined together *in situ* indicates that there was at least one item of jewelry, most likely a necklace or bracelet, that was deposited in the mound itself. Perhaps it was placed with a burial as a grave good.

The discovery of an archer's wrist bracer in the barrow is especially interesting because it was the first of its kind to be found within a burial context in Ireland. Archer's wrist bracers are flat pieces of stone fashioned into a specific shape (*fig. 4*) and are generally accepted as being intended to be worn to protect the wrist from the recoil of a bowstring, though the larger significance is still being debated (Woodward, et al., 2006). They are a key part of the Beaker package, and the presence of the barbed and tanged arrowhead that was also found in the barrow is an extremely strong indication that at least one deposition into this barrow was connected to the Beaker culture. The wrist bracer found at Knockloon would be the first found in Ireland in such a burial context and, as such, has the potential to completely change the way the Beaker phenomenon is understood in an Irish context.

Anthropological Analysis

The ancient people who chose to build on top of Knockloon Hill chose this location very clearly and deliberately. By utilizing Eliade's theory of the distinction between the sacred and

the profane and the theoretical framework of phenomenology, it becomes possible to theorize as to how and why this particular location was selected.

Mircea Eliade is perhaps best known for his theory on the sacred and the profane, which deals with the manner in which people conceptualize things of religious nature. Such things exist on a conceptually – and often subsequently physically – different plane than regular everyday life (Eliade 1957, Pals 2006). By separating what is considered religious, the realm of the sacred, from the banality of everyday life, the profane, the sacred becomes that much more extraordinary. According to this theory, in order for a person to have any contact with the sacred, they must leave the plane of the profane. This departure from the profane is typically enacted in physical space, whether through the entering of a place specifically marked out as sacred, such as a temple or a church, or through a ritual that allows the person to depart symbolically, such as in a rite of passage.

A more recent anthropological field of study known as phenomenology may also be useful in the interpretation of sites such as Knockloon. Phenomenology is the study of space in relation to the human body and human understanding, essentially, the study of how consciousness affects the manner in which the world around is experienced (Tilley 1994). According to this theory, space is not an empty stage on which human life is performed; humans interact with the space around them and develop relationships to it as they move within it. People do not simply exist within a given space or landscape, they have thoughts and feelings about it (Tilley 1994). This can be as simple as thinking a scenic view is pretty, or as complex as regarding a certain place with heightened emotions if one knows one's ancestors lived or died there. Additionally, all of the human experience must be filtered through the lens of the physical

body and its relationship to the world within which one acts. A place one can reach with relative ease will be perceived differently than a place that is extremely difficult to get to (Tilley 1994).

In terms of Knockloon Hill, it is the tallest in a line of drumlins at the edge of the Burren, with plenty of soil for the construction of a mound. Soil is not available in such quantities on the karst that covers much of the Burren. So the decision to put a barrow in that particular spot began with assessment of the ability to physically construct such a monument there. Although Knockloon meets the bare minimum that allowed for a barrow to be constructed there, there is still the broader question of why that particular hill and not one of the other nearby drumlins.

The hill, while perhaps not the highest in the general area, can still be seen for a long ways throughout much of the surrounding landscape. Barrows in England have been shown to been very deliberately placed, often on top of hills or ridges, so that they would be extremely visible. There also exists a phenomenon called false cresting, where the barrow has been placed on a high point of the hill or ridge but not *the* highest point of that particular landform. It is theorized that this was a deliberate choice on the behalf of the builders as a way to make the barrow more visible from a specific angle (Field 1998). The barrow on Knockloon Hill seems to be similar in this regard. It is not on the highest point of the hill, but perhaps the second highest. This, of course, raises some interesting questions on which direction the mound was meant to be seen from and by whom. Many barrows in England, and even the great passage tombs at Brú na Bóinne in Ireland were oriented so they were most visible from nearby rivers, possibly so travelers on these prehistoric highways would be the ones to get the best look at them. Knockloon, however, does not overlook a river at all, and though it is relatively near a lake of decent size, it is unlikely the monument would have been visible quite that far. However, it is on the edge of the Burren, facing outward toward where the ecology changes from the rocky soil of

the Burren that does not tend to support much plant life other than grasses and flowers to more fertile soil that supports taller plants. This drastic change in ecology may have marked the edge of the territory of the people living on the Burren and signaled to those living outside of it that this territory was claimed.

As for the crest of Knockloon Hill, it has thus far found to have been empty of any features or structures. Ros Ó Maoldúin (2018) theorizes that a space left intentionally blank on a hill with several other archeological features may indicate a space that was utilized for rituals. Such rituals may have been related to the burial mound as funerary rites or celebrations of the dead. It is unlikely that those interred in the barrow were cremated directly on the monument itself, so perhaps a large empty space at the crest of the hill was utilized for building pyres.

Knockloon is not merely just a rather tall hill, it is also a rather steep one, which makes it more difficult to climb when compared to other nearby hills. These features may have been the reason this particular hill was selected, if one considers the implications that would have within both Eliade's theory and phenomenology. Through Eliade's theory of the sacred and the profane, Knockloon Hill seems to be set apart the profane world of everyday life and the sacred realm of the dead, and it does so in two ways. The first is that it is a hill and separate from any known habitation sites. Excavations in the enclosures have not revealed any evidence of habitation, and geophysics has failed to turn up any evidence of permanent structures of any kind. This was a place set apart from daily life. The second manner in which this site sets itself apart from daily life is the fact that it is such a steep hill. There are few ways to more clearly set a place apart from the norm than to place it on a hill that takes some effort to climb, and phenomenology makes this point very clearly.

As previously stated, phenomenology theorizes that all human experience is filtered through the physical experiences of the body. As Christopher Tilley (1994, 14) writes, “The body constitutes a way of relating to, perceiving, and understanding the world.” This means that any physical strain or exertion experienced in a place will be a factor in the manner in which this place is perceived. This is relevant to the site at Knockloon because the physical strain of climbing the hill would have served to further set the place apart from regular, everyday life.

There are numerous ethnographic examples of sacred sites on top of mountains and ritualized pilgrimages to visit them. Such journeys may be linked to the lineage of the one making them; a symbolic “return” to the “origin” of their lineage (Tilly 1994). This may have had strong symbolic significance in a place such as the Burren, which at the time of the construction of the barrow on Knockloon, had older tombs of various types which may have served as symbols of specific people on the landscape itself, proclaiming the symbolic claim of all those of a certain lineage to that territory. In this way, lineage is not only tied to the land itself but mapped across the physical landscape. This dovetails nicely with the theory that the barrow was so constructed to be a territorial marker, as establishing lineage and ancestry as a *physical* feature in the landscape would have served a dual purpose. For those to whom the territory belonged, it would have joined them by blood to the land itself, and for those to whom it did not belong, it would have proclaimed the land to be tied to another group of people, guarded by their ancestors.

Similarly, phenomenology also emphasizes that the memory of places is important. The tombs and habitation on nearby Roughaun Hill (Jones & Walsh 1996) may have been important in the selection of Knockloon for the barrow and related features. From inserts into ancient portal tombs to modern graves in medieval churchyards, Ireland has a long history of choosing to bury

the dead on land that was already “sanctified” by the graves of those who came before. In this case, the tombs on Roughaun Hill would have been seen as forebearers who the people who constructed the barrow on Knockloon wished to bury their dead near.

Conclusion

The interpretation of the site of Knockloon Hill has the potential to fill in major gaps in the literature and increase the understanding of barrows within the field of Irish archaeology. By utilizing the theories’ of Eliade and phenomenology, it may be possible to gain a glimpse into the minds and intentions of the people who built such sites. This would result in a better understanding of barrows as a whole, especially Irish barrows, which have largely been neglected. The nature of some of the artifacts found within the monument may also increase knowledge and understanding of the Chalcolithic in Ireland and the Beaker phenomenon. Analysis of the site within the broader context may provide answers about the purpose of the monument and its broader place in history.

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Appendix



Fig. 1: Large Map of the Burren Neighbourhood, Clare County Library.



Fig. 2 Island of Ireland location map Clare. Wikimedia Commons.

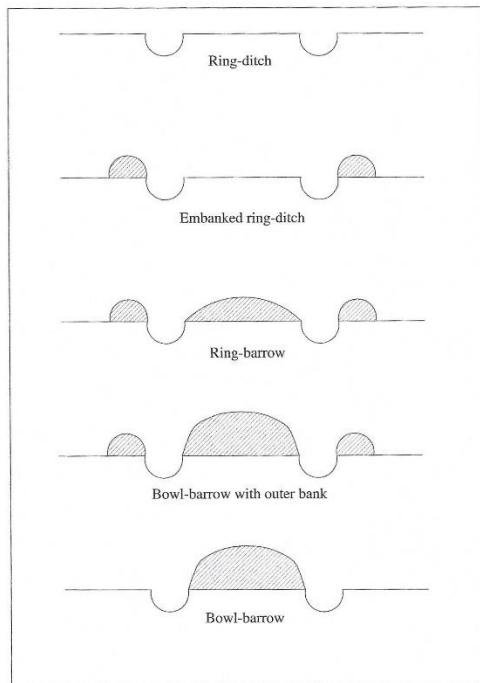


Fig. 3: Barrows. Connor Newman, *Tara: An Archaeological Survey*. Dublin: Royal Irish Academy for the Discovery Programme.

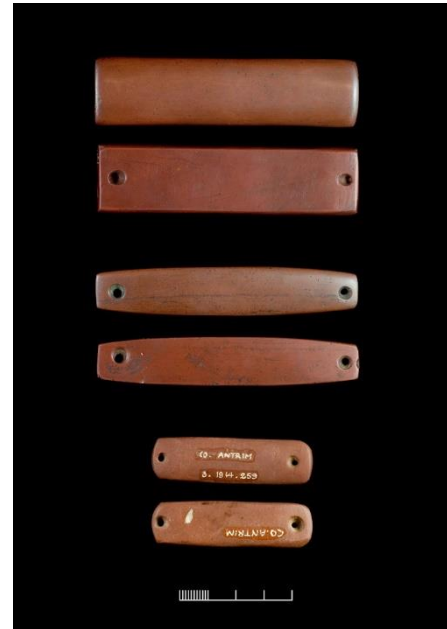


Fig. 4: A selection of typical red jasper wrist-bracers from Ireland. Roe, F. & Woodward, A. (2009). *Bits and Pieces: Early Bronze Age Stone Bracers from Ireland*. *Internet Archaeology*. 26